ALSO BY GAYL JONES

FICTION

Corregidora (novel) (1975)
Eva's Man (novel) (1976)
The Healing (novel) (1998)
Mosquito (novel) (1999)
Palmares (novel) (2021)
The Birdcatcher (novel) (2022)
Butter (novellas, stories and fragments) (2023)

POETRY COLLECTIONS

Song for Anninho (1981)
The Hermit-Woman (1983)
Xarque and Other Poems (1985)
Song for Almeyda and Song for Anninho (2022)

OTHER WORKS

Chile Woman (play) (1974)
Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature (criticism) (1991)

WHITE RAT

Short Stories *by*

Gayl Jones

BEACON PRESS
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For Thaddeo K. Babiiha

YOUR POEMS HAVE VERY LITTLE COLOR IN THEM

"YOUR POEMS have very little color in them, no color," she said.

"That's true," he said.

I wonder why they haven't.

The man with the beard sits in the corner of the room with his legs crossed. He's not looking at me. I want to go over and say something to him but don't know what to say.

Anyway, I don't think I should be here.

The woman who talks about Paris and the French Theatre and Sartre is very nice. She tells how cats make her nose run and she has allergies.

I can't imagine being Proust and having no one talk. I can imagine me.

(I am at a lunch table. There are eight of us. No one is talking. "What's the matter?" I ask. "No one's saying anything. Is everybody sleepy or is this just an uncommunicative time?" "It's just an uncommunicative time." "Everybody's meditating.")

But it was not an uncomfortable silence, a natural one. This was my first uncomfortable silence with him. I suppose it's because we were supposed to be talking.

A lot of people here say a lot of things, trying to be funny, and I don't know how to answer them, and end up saying what I don't mean, if anything. "All conversations are lies, or something like that." But I do not try to please.

These people are older than me except for one girl who knows me but I don't know her. She talks, and now I know her. I say how I have heard her name before and she gives me possible reasons why.

The three-and-a-half-year-old boy who is terribly brilliant is going to bed. I should have met him earlier, I think. I would have had somebody to talk to.

I listen.

The man in the corner with the beard isn't saying anything now. Once he was standing talking, once he even talked to me, but I didn't know very much to say to him.

There are two kinds of people, those who don't talk and those who can't talk.

Some people talk a lot. They are sometimes very nice people.

There are some people who can't talk or don't talk or don't know what to say. These are the people you have to get to know. They are sometimes very nice people, too.

Some people say things they shouldn't say, like Mr. B., who said a very bad thing. It is better to say nothing at all than to say what you shouldn't say.

Some people think before they talk. Some people talk before they think. Some people make you say things you don't want to say. I don't know how they do it. I wish I knew someone who could make you say what you do want to say. I suppose that is only yourself.

Some people try to be funny. Some people don't have to try to be funny. Sometimes I can be funny. Sometimes I can be ridiculous. I don't try to be funny anymore. Once I was making up funny songs

and telling funny stories to the girls in the dorm. They thought they were very funny at first. But since I did it all the time and was never serious except with a few close friends, one close friend, they got tired of my funny songs and funny stories and dances. And so I am not funny anymore nor free. They were very disgusted and made me feel bad.

musterole between my toes
I had a cold
I had a cold
My mother rubbed me in musterole
I went to bed
It hurt my head
Went up my nose
When I arose
I raised my head to see my feet
For they were burning with so much heat
And I had musterole between my toes
I had musterole between my toes
Nobody knows
Nobody knows
How it got there.

"You've heard about folk saints in Mexico. How they're also called healers sometimes and go around healing people. You remember in the olden days how they tortured heretics and people who weren't what they claimed to be by putting them on the rack or hanging them from their toes. There was this folk saint named Antonio de la Vega. A Mexican folk saint, a Christ figure, and you know how when Christ was on the cross they said if you're really who you say you are why don't you save yourself. There's this record

album that tells the story of the saint to go along with the song they composed about him.

They hung him from his toes
Why don't you let yourself go
You say that you're a folk saint
But you're doing things you caint
Antonio, Oh, Antonio

"Is that all? Had us sitting here listening for that?"

They all leave.

"Hangman, Hangman, slack that noose" is a real song and so is "Flat Foot Floogie with the floy floy" and so is "Make me a pallet on your floor."

And if your good girl comes
Darling she will never know
Make me oh make me a pallet on your floor
And when your good girl comes
Darling she will never know.
Now they believe nothing I tell them, even when I say I am reformed.

But this is digression. (Convenient)

There are people. They are talking. I am twenty. I used to think twenty was old. Old people are young. Young people are old. The oldest person in the room is three and a half.

There is a man whom I call "the man" who is terribly nice. He is talking to me now, or not talking. Then he says something about going. I asked him is he going. He says yes. Then I say yes. Then he and I and Mr. W. who are inseparable get in a small car, he is squeezed up in the back, but doesn't mind, and I am driven back

to the campus. When I get out he starts to climb out and into the front seat. I am inside by now and a lot of girls are watching Paul Newman in *Hombre*. I go upstairs and change my clothes and come back down. I never knew so many people cared about Paul Newman. "He has beautiful eyes," someone said. He died at the end of the picture and many people were sad. "It used to be that the star of the picture always lived," Emma said. Most people go upstairs but some stay downstairs and play bid whist. I don't play cards, except poker, but nobody ever wants to play poker. So I tell them cards is a vice, the same as smoking and drinking and staying up late. The news is finally over, fortunately, and a picture comes on with some man and Mamie Van Doren. Somebody gets up to change the channel because there seems to be a general consensus that nobody wants to see Mamie Van Doren. The girl who is about to change the channel asks, "Does anybody want to see Mamie Van Doren?" I say, "I want to see Mamie Van Doren." She changes the channel anyway. There is a picture with Kirk Douglas and he is close with the Indians. He comes down by the stream and takes off his shirt and starts washing up. An Indian girl is down by the stream washing some clothes. He is older than she by many years, but she is old enough to be considered a woman, a very young woman. She seems angry with him when he comes over by her.

"You're mad at me because I saw you bathing in the stream this morning," he says. "I used to see your mother wash you when you were this high."

"I'm not that high anymore," she says.

She starts to get up, but he grabs her and kisses her, or tries to. She fights and has her knife out but he takes it away from her and she breaks away and runs back to camp.

Later he comes back into camp with his shirt still off. There is a handsome young Indian man watching him, but he is terribly silent.

Later Kirk Douglas is lying in the sand. He is throwing the knife in the sand, playing with it.

They tell me to get up and go to bed because I am going to sleep on the couch.

THE WOMEN

I WAS THREE YEARS OLD when the first woman come. My mama had just get the divorce from my daddy. Miss Maybell was the first woman. Miss Maybell Logan. She lived up on Douglas Street and had a mustache. All us children used to point at her and make fun a her cause she had a mustache. But the grownups didn't. I guess they had just got used to it. Miss Maybell Logan used to come sometimes and spend the night. I used to wonder why she come and spend the night when she got her own house. She used to go in the bedroom with mama and sleep where my daddy used to sleep. My mama always couldn't get to sleep when Miss Maybell was there, cause she be tossing and turning all night. I'd get scared sometimes and hide under the covers. When my daddy was there, in the mornings, while it was still dark outside, my mama would let me go in the bedroom and climb in the bed and sleep between the two of them. But when Miss Maybell was there, mama wouldn't let me sleep between the two of them. I was scared of Miss Maybell anyway. I didn't want to get in bed with them. In the morning, Miss Maybell would look at me with her mustache, and then she would leave. Miss Maybell kept coming till I was five, and that's how I remembered her since I was three. And then when I was five, my mama and Miss Maybell have a fight, but I didn't know what the fight was about, and then Miss Maybell didn't come no more. It